

Guilt and the 'Fair Trial'



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The need for a trial

Jack Jordan, a psychologist from the USA, who has worked extensively with people bereaved by suicide, uses the analogy of the 'Fair Trial' to assist people come to terms with persistent feelings of guilt and failure.

These feelings arise when people inevitably try to understand what has happened and begin with a review of their role. People effectively put themselves on trial to see if they deserve to be convicted.

Jordan noticed that bereaved people can develop a fixed perception of their own failure to:

- Provide support to the person who suicided
- Recognize the warning signs
- Intervene to stop the suicide.

There is a tendency to play the role of prosecutor AND judge and to do this in the absence of a defense and without all of the evidence being brought to the 'trial'.

The need to include all of the evidence

As bereaved people embark on this review of their accountability for perceived failures, they do so with the advantage of hindsight, in light of what they know now about the suicide.

Before the suicide, they did not have all of the evidence. People may need to be reminded, sometimes repeatedly, that *you cannot have known then, what you know now.*

Jordan finds that people tend to both:

- overestimate their own power and influence on the events leading to the suicide and;
- underestimate or remain unaware of all of the other factors that contributed to the death.

While those on the outside may view these feelings and perceptions of guilt as something irrational that should be challenged, Jordan and others believe this 'rumination' serves an important purpose in coming to terms with the trauma.

It can serve to address some inevitable and universal questions about:

- What happened?
- Why did it happen?
- Whose fault was it?
- How can it be prevented from happening again?

The key to this exploration of accountability and its potential to bring some relief from the suffering of feelings of guilt and failure, is that a *fair trial* needs to be conducted, which means that *all the evidence* needs to be presented.

The verdict

Through this process of examining all of the evidence in a fair trial, those bereaved by suicide can over time, come to see the complexity of factors leading to the suicide and to know with more certainty that there were factors not in their control as well as factors that were unknowable.

While this fair trial does not necessarily mean that feelings of guilt and failure will evaporate, Jordan describes this process as necessary to the development of a narrative or story that makes sense to the bereaved person. It is important to remember that a full understanding of why someone ended their own life is unlikely to be reached.

This personal narrative of the death can bring an understanding of the suicide that is:

- Complex – recognises the multiple and complex factors leading to the suicide and that it was not just one experience or trigger
- Realistic – recognises and tolerates that it may never be possible to know entirely why the suicide happened and doesn't overestimate the person's own influence or underestimate other factors
- Compassionate – recognises that the bereaved, the person who died, their loved ones and others did the best that was possible, given who they were and what they had to deal with.

So, when you next find yourself feeling troubled or even overwhelmed with guilt, it may be helpful to ask yourself:

- Am I giving myself a fair trial?
- Am I considering all of the evidence?
- Who else can help me gather and consider the evidence?

Adapted from: Jordan, J. R. & McIntosh, J. L. (Eds). (2011) *Grief After Suicide: Understanding the consequences and caring for the survivors*. Routledge, New York.